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MYTHS ABOUT *THE CHURCH AND THE BOMB*

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MYTHS ABOUT *THE CHURCH AND THE BOMB*

Sydney D. Bailey

The Board of Social Responsibility of the Church of England responded to the resolution of the general synod of July 1979 that 'it explore how the theological debate relating to discipleship in this field [the Church's role in preserving and promoting peace] might be more effectively and purposefully conducted throughout the Church of England in the light of the witness and insights of the whole ecumenical movement' by setting up a working party with terms of reference as subsequently amended as follows:

(1) To study the implications for Christian discipleship of the acceptance by the major military powers of a role for nuclear weapons in their strategy.
(2) To consider the bearing of this on the adequacy of past Christian teaching and ethical analysis regarding the conduct of war.

The report of the working party, *The Church and the Bomb,* was published last autumn.

I was a member of the working party which produced *The Church and the Bomb* for the Church of England. This report has been one factor in helping to push the issue of nuclear weapons to the centre of national debate. Our working party made 22 recommendations, some directed to the churches, some to the policy of the British government, and some to international negotiations and the building of the institutions of peace. It is not surprising, however, that most attention has been directed to the recommendation that Britain should disengage from direct association with nuclear weapons, a policy which was rejected by a three to one vote in the general synod last February.

Considering the complexity of the issues, I believe the media dealt fairly with our report. There have, however, been misunderstandings from political platforms and pulpits, and some of these have now acquired the status of myths. In this article I review eighteen of these myths. In most cases I give precise quotations before adding my own comments, but in a couple of instances I formulate the complaints as intelligibly as I can on the basis of such oral comments as I have heard at diocesan synods or local meetings.

1. 'It is sometimes supposed—and the Church of England Working Party seems to suppose it—that the lawfulness of nuclear weapons is the only great moral issue raised by the Cold War.'

Paul Johnson, *The Times,* Jan. 29th 1983.

We supposed no such thing. The mandate we were given by the

Church of England Board for Social Responsibility dealt expressly and exclusively with nuclear weapons. We were not asked to advise on other great moral issues.

2. 'The authors of the report dismiss [defoliants and napalm] as "a red herring".' The Rev. Edward Norman, *Sunday Telegraph,* Feb 6th 1983.

We did not regard these weapons as a red herring. We were asked to study the implications of nuclear weapons and not other weapons which, if used, would violate the principles of proportion and non-combatant immunity. We noted that nuclear weapons could not be disinvented, but that even if they were universally abandoned tomorrow, behind them stand other equally grotesque weapons.

Incidentally, I would be interested to know where Mr. Norman found his 'red herring' quote.

3. 'The most noticeable characteristic of the group [which wrote *The Church and the Bomb*] is that it is the kind of body that looks neutral, appears to represent all points of view, but is actually weighted in one direction by the presence on it of a few strong personalities [so that] it must bend largely in their direction. Two of its six members are pacifists. One of them, Mr. Sydney Bailey is a left-wing Quaker; the other, the Reverend Paul Oestreicher is a very left-wing Anglican pacifist . . .'

Ronald Butt, *The Times,* Oct. 19th 1982.

The working party was deliberately set up so as to have a balanced composition as between different forms of technical expertise and different theological and ethical approaches. Opinions changed while we were at work, and our final report was unanimous. We described briefly and objectively three different kinds of pacifism, distinguishing these from unilaterialism and neutralism (pp. 101–2 and 119–24), but ours was not a pacifist report (p. 163). Indeed, at the press conference for launching the report, two pacifist clergy reproached us for not going far enough in the pacifist direction.

4. 'Sustaining the report's technical and strategic assessments is the belief, many times repeated, that Soviet intentions are peaceful.'

The Rev. Edward Norman, *Sunday Telegraph,* Feb. 6th 1983.

We explained some of the difficulties of evaluating Soviet intentions ('The Soviet Union is a closed society') and we described to the best of our ability Soviet military capabilities (pp. 170–4) and nuclear strategy

(pp. 20–5), as well as the capabilities and strategies of other nuclear weapon powers. We reviewed the Soviet role in the evolution of the cold war (pp. 67–9), but we nowhere asserted that Soviet intentions were peaceful (nor, indeed, that they were not).

5. '... Not only is it effectively torpedoing present efforts at *multi*-lateral disarmament ...'

The Rev. Dr. N. M. de S. Cameron, *The Times*, Feb. 5th 1983.

'... my fear is that the kind of action being advocated will actually undermine the negotiations now in progress in Geneva.'

The Archbishop of Canterbury, general synod, Feb. 10th 1983.

We devoted a good deal of attention to techniques of international negotiation on disarmament (pp. 128–34). In our concluding chapter we made a number of recommendations, the first of which was that international disarmament negotiations should be vigorously prosecuted and backed to the hilt with positive comment and publicity (p. 154). We were aware, all the same, that no international negotiations were taking place when we wrote our report about Britain's nuclear weapons, theatre or strategic, and that it had been a cardinal principle of US negotiating policy to exclude British (and French) nuclear systems.

6. 'the working party arrived at the following conclusions ... (c) That the idea of deterrence as used in defence policy cannot be justified in the light of Christian teaching.' *Report to the general synod by the Church of England Board for Social Responsibility*, Jan. 1983 (GS 542) p. 18.

There is a semantic problem here, for deterrence has now acquired a technical meaning in military strategy. The prevention of war must, of course, be a prime Christian aim. We described and analysed NATO's deterrence doctrine at some length (pp. 40–1, 48–9, 98–101, 150–4), but the conclusion of the working party was that 'the *nuclear* element in deterrence is no longer a reliable or morally acceptable approach to the future of the world; and we went on to say that to include a nuclear element in deterrence 'is not sufficiently compelling to outweigh the huge moral imperatives against using nuclear weapons at all' (p. 154, my italics). It is not the deterrence of war which the working party found objectionable, but the threat to use nuclear weapons as a form of deterrence.

7. '... on page 163 [the working party] welcomes the deterrent effect of the

continued effect of the [nuclear] bomb even if it were locked up.'

The Bishop of London, general synod, Feb. 10th 1983.

The Bishop has misunderstood the point of this paragraph. We wrote that nuclear weapons cannot be treated in isolation, for they have simply brought forward the time when war in general is seen in all its futility. Nuclear disarmament, we wrote, 'is only the first and most urgent instalment of the task of eradicating war, for war is no longer viable.'

We were not welcoming nuclear weapons: we were saying that their elimination is a most pressing task on the world's agenda.

8. 'It would be perfectly proper,' the Working Party writes, 'for a Government to say that it has no objection if another partner [in NATO] interposes a threat of nuclear retaliation to ward off an attack.'

P. H. Rippon, general synod, Feb. 10th 1983.

'I am a little concerned about some of the morality of the report, because it seems we are being told that it is immoral for us to have nuclear weapons in this country to defend ourselves, but somehow it is all right to shelter under someone else's nuclear umbrella.'

Canon J. H. Williams, general synod Feb. 10th 1983.

We recommended that Britain should disengage from nuclear weapons but remain a member of NATO. We dealt at some length with the so-called free rider problem (pp. 134–8), but we made plain our own view that 'a renouncing state . . . would have to make it clear to its allies that . . . it did not wish nuclear arms to be used by others in its defence . . .' (p. 137). We noted that we could not make other people's moral decisions for them, and we went on: 'provided we have done all that we reasonably can to avoid benefiting from conduct of which we disapprove, and to make it less likely, then to pursue our own line is neither hypocritical nor in any other way more despicable morally than that of an individual citizen who exercises the right of conscientious objection. To be within the ambit of a nuclear deterrent over which you have no control and which you sincerely wish were not there is not immoral' (p. 138).

9. It has been claimed that we concluded that British disengagement from direct association with nuclear weapons could be quickly implemented.

I dare say that we in the working party are partly responsible for this myth. We suggested that the process of disengagement from nuclear weapons should be completed by a not too distant date, perhaps not much more than the lifetime of one parliament (p. 140). Later in the

report we proposed that Britain's dissociation from nuclear weapons of all kinds should be decided in a single political operation, but that the timetable for implementation would be a matter for negotiation with Britain's allies (p. 160). Perhaps we should have made it clearer that the programme of disengagement would be extremely complex: my own view is that even a very determined government might need nearer twenty years than five to complete the whole process.

10. It has also been said that we supported violent and illegal forms of demonstration and protest on the part of those opposed to nuclear weapons.

It is not surprising that we spent a good deal of time discussing this issue. We described the moral position of those who object to military service on grounds of conscience (pp. 101–2), and we referred to the Peace Tax Campaign and to the predicament of scientists and civil servants who might refuse to work on nuclear weapons (p. 161). The view of the working party was that 'it does not make moral sense to use violent means in protesting against violence', but we favoured 'pastoral support' to those who feel 'called to new forms of witness . . .' (p. 161).

11. '. . . there is no discussion of the role of power in human affairs . . .'
The Rev. Richard Harries, *The Times*, Oct. 21st 1982.

Addicts of the television series 'Yes, Minister' will recall Sir Humphrey Appleby's advice to Bernard Woolley about how to discredit a report whose conclusions you dislike. First, says Sir Humphrey, say that the document leaves important questions unanswered. That has certainly happened to our report, though doubtless for less ignoble reasons. Several friendly critics have claimed that we did not come to grips with the problem of power.

I am not sure precisely what this complaint means since the whole report was about the use and control of power. The chapter on theology and ethics included a section 'Principalities and Powers' (pp. 117–19), and we returned to this theme in our concluding chapter (pp. 148–9). It is true, nonetheless, that we did not deal specifically with the general question of the ethics of coercion, as this was not part of our brief.

12. 'The report refers throughout to everyone who is not actually in the armed forces as "innocent".'
The Rev. Edward Norman, *Sunday Telegraph*, Feb. 6th 1983.

The report does not do what Mr. Norman alleges. We explained that the notion that non-combatants shall be immune from direct attack was originally 'an application of the more general moral principle that it is wrong to kill innocent people' (p. 87). And we went on to explain that in this context, 'an innocent person is one who is unarmed and is not involved in the fighting.' Elsewhere throughout the report, we always referred to non-combatants or civilians, not to the innocent.

13. 'The Church of England working party does not seem to have heard about [the government's nuclear targeting policy].'
Clifford Longley, *The Times*, Oct. 11th 1983.

On the contrary, we took care to study the little that has been made public about targeting, in particular, in Open Government doc. 80/23 of July 1980: '. . . deterrence is concerned essentially with posing a potential threat to key aspects of Soviet state power.' Having pondered this statement, we felt justified in writing that the United States makes public more information about nuclear policy than does Britain, and that Britain's targeting policy is 'still shrouded in secrecy' (p. 60). That is one reason why we asked that the government should provide more information about defence and disarmament policy (pp. 60–1, 155). We concluded, nonetheless, that *any* use of nuclear weapons, whatever the target and however accurate the missile, released harmful radiation indiscriminately and would therefore violate the principle of non-combatant immunity.

14. '. . . the report formulates [the Principle of Proportion] in four quite different ways.' Professor Keith Ward, *The Times*, Oct. 20th 1982.

It is true that we used the concept of proportionality in different senses because the concept has different meanings and applications in the Christian tradition, but we tried to make it clear on each occasion in which sense the concept was being used (pp. 85–6, 88–90, 96–7). The confusion about not using force disproportionately is common in Christian literature, and it would be a real service if someone were able to clarify the various usages.

15. The report 'argues that opposition to unilateralism is morally outrageous.'
Professor Keith Ward, *The Times*, Oct. 20th 1982.

We did no such thing. We argued that there were no courses of action that allowed us to escape from ethical dilemmas (p. 42). We stated that

there were a number of positions for which a respectable moral case could be made, and we maintained that it would be as stupid and arrogant to claim that any answer were obviously right as it would be manifestly unjust to impugn the moral and intellectual integrity of those who were led to a different conclusion from our own (p. 143). We expressly accepted the inevitability of 'plural approaches' (p. 156). I should have thought that we were more open to the reproach of being lukewarm about our own stance than of deriding positions we did not adopt.

16. 'What the world would see if Britain took the line advocated by the Bishop of Salisbury would not be a highly moral gesture but yet further evidence of a British decline.' The Bishop of Durham, general synod, Feb. 10th 1983.

The Bishop of Durham may be right, but at least we went to the trouble to spell out how it would be possible to minimise such a misperception (p. 133), and we maintained that serious moral decisions should not have worst-case prospects on one side contrasted with best-case prospects on the other (p. 142).

17. It has been alleged that the report contains a 'logical fallacy' by confusing a threat or conditional intention and the act itself.
Clifford Longley, *The Times,* Feb. 7th 1983.

It is not true that we were guilty of a logical fallacy, though the issue is exceedingly difficult. We did not say that there was no moral difference between a threat and an act. What we did say was that if an act was wrong, a conditional intention to commit the act was also wrong (pp. 98–101).

We returned to this problem later in the report when we argued that 'to have a nuclear arsenal deployed is to be committed already to using it in certain circumstances' (p. 153).

18. 'Another understandable, but I fear, folorn hope . . . is that Britain's gesture might have an exemplary effect . . . It is most improbable that a unilateral gesture by the United Kingdom would bring in any new signatory [to the Non-Proliferation Treaty].'
The Archbishop of Canterbury, general synod, Feb. 10th 1983.

'I do not accept the arguments of the unilateralists that if we alone renounced nuclear weapons, others would follow.'
P. H. Rippon, general synod, Feb. 10th 1983.

> 'There is one fantasy which is so large that it causes a perturbing wiggle and loss of grip . . . This is that our [Britain's] unilateralism would encourage . . . others with bombs to disarm . . .'
>
> Professor John Vincent, *Sunday Times,* Oct. 24th 1982.

The most important argument in our report is that nuclear weapons are indiscriminate and potentially disproportionate, as those terms have been used in the Christian tradition. The next most important argument relates to the threat of nuclear proliferation, to which we returned time and again (pp. 17, 36, 38–40, 63–4, 161.)

There are now five avowed nuclear-weapon states. At least six others either have nuclear weapons secretly, or the components from which they could be assembled, or have taken a firm decision to go down that path. By the end of the century, if present policies continue, there are likely to be a dozen countries with their own nuclear weapons, mainly in the most tense parts of the world.

Each potential proliferator uses precisely the arguments which have been advanced why Britain should have its own nuclear weapons: 'if the U.K. is entitled to argue . . . for an independent [nuclear] force there seems no end to the number of states entitled to do so' (p. 36). We did not claim that British dissociation from nuclear weapons would achieve miracles, but we suggested that it would 'perhaps . . . delay or halt some of the proliferation which . . . now seems likely' (p. 161). My own view is that to try to prevent more than a dozen countries from acquiring nuclear weapons is a realistic goal and, as Archbishop Derek Worlock put it on World Peace Sunday, we in Britain are especially well placed to begin the process of scaling down. 'That is not gullible', he said, '. . . it is a calculated risk in a nuclear age where risks abound'.

I have focussed in this article on eighteen of the myths which have grown up around our report, but I admit that the report has many faults and gaps. If we had had more time or different terms of reference, we could no doubt have produced a better report. The matter is now being considered by diocesan and deanery synods, but discussion of the issues raised by the report extends far beyond Anglican circles. The reasoning in the report follows much the same lines as that in the Pastoral Letter of the American Catholic Bishops. The issues will be part of national and international debate so long as nuclear weapons are made and deployed.

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